

VERITAS & VANITAS



A JOURNAL OF CREATIVE
NONFICTION

Spring 2000

The Ohio State University Marion

Jan Campbell

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The Ohio State University at Marion

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Preface

This issue of *Veritas&Vanitas* is comprised of works from students in English 268/568, The Writing of Creative Non-Fiction. Each student has a unique background that contributes to this collage of talented voices, relaying an expression of identity. The submissions to this publication reflect a flowing rhythm of personal themes that blend experience and narration. These pieces represent a language from the self, portraying ideas that range from rebelling against authority to celebrating our personal differences. We hope our readers will look upon this issue and see the growth of writers striving to find themselves.

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Distorted Voices

Jill Leathem

"Ah-haaaah! He, he, he!" My brother's victory laugh vibrated throughout the small car, teasing my ears with its melodrama. "Got you that time, Jop."

Not understanding the reason my brother called me "Jop," except that it possibly meant he was in a good mood, I rubbed my temple. I knew better than to look out the passenger window while my brother drove. He reveled in practical jokes, especially when they called for swerving the car violently so my head would collide with the window. "Why do you have to be such a jerk... Redbeard?" I added as an afterthought. My brother shaved twice a week, Sunday and Wednesday, regardless of the occasion. It was Saturday and his bristly red beard resembled a rusty SOS scrubbing pad.

"Aye?" he asked, getting out of the car. "Me thinks yeer mad cuz it's nearly Christmas, me hearty." With one eye shut he hobbled stiff-legged to the garage door. I presumed he was imitating a peg leg and glass eye. I remained in the car, too angry to speak. Jarrod was right. I did hate Christmas. Snow, carols, men in red suits, shopping, candy, and mistletoe, the things that make a holiday seem more like a carnival made me want to vomit. What was it that made people act ridiculous and spend more than they could afford? They were like my brother, out of touch with reality, constantly making jokes of serious situations and unable to see the horrid world around them.

I am a depressed individual, not the kind of sadness that leads to suicide or psychotic behavior, but the low-spirited attitude that is an ache inside of myself and refuses to be budged. It is a stubborn state of being that is always with me. I cannot blame anyone but myself for the way I feel. I have a great family and relative financial stability. I don't have anything medically or physically debilitating and consider myself reasonably intelligent. Yet I am displeased with myself.

There is a river that runs through me. On the one side of the river, I struggle—a tormented soul trapped within the recesses of the body wanting to break free from the quicksand of catastrophe, all of the evil in the world and the blackness that obscures the future drowning me, pulling my legs and swathing itself in my uncertainty and fear.

Thoughts of myself as unworthy of anything good reside on the other side of the river, reprimanding me for succeeding while others fail. These two parts do not mix, constantly combating one another, appearing as a small voice that never stills, glorying in making everyone feel as miserable and undeserving as I do. The result is a terrible sense of guilt in conjunction with a bad disposition and outlook on life. I get up in the morning and wonder if I can make it through the day without being rude and unnecessarily mean to everyone around me.

Several days before my brother impersonated Long John Silver, I was racing down the halls of the university I attend when I was stopped by an acquaintance from high school. "It's been a long time, Jill," Rita proclaimed in her high, squeaky voice while thumping me on the back. "Nice to see an old friend," she said, twirling a fluorescent pink pen in her hand.

I grinned painfully and charged down the hall, ignoring her mindless chatter. I reasoned that if I walked fast enough chances were good that I'd lose her in the crowd. I hadn't seen Rita in four years, and for that, I was eternally thankful. She was outspoken and carefree, two of the most disgusting traits bestowed upon a human being. She lived in a fantasyland where everyone lived in harmony, and marshmallows grew on red trees while smiley faces decorated every child's math paper. She had never done anything to me personally, but it didn't matter. During my sojourn in high school, I kept my mouth shut while her twittering voice wrapped itself around the locked gate of ultimate comebacks sure to burst through the iron doors of my self-control given the slightest provocation. That morning it was too much. I hoped she would understand my silence as a plea for her to stop following me. Instead, Rita smiled broadly, explaining why she left Rio Grande University. "The campus was just *na-sty*," she stressed. I risked looking at her. It was more likely that Rita's poor study habits from high school followed her to college and flunked her. She stopped twirling the pen, putting it between her teeth. My eyes widened as a black snake sprung from the tip, coiling around the long pen as its twisting psychedelic body formed the words, "EAT ME." Rita's frizzy blond hair transformed, growing to her shoulders. The sparkly barrette turned into a black ribbon while her shirt and jeans resewed themselves into a knee length blue dress with a frilled white hem.

I could have walked away or charmed her with an equally annoying reply, possibly something as irritating as the song the Mad Hatter sings to Alice in Wonderland during the tea party. I could have wished her "A very happy unbirthday" because, yes, "there are three hundred and sixty-four unbirthdays, unbirthdays every year." However, I couldn't bear to join her world of whirling facades. The voice inside of me had a better plan. The weaver of retribution and vengeance that chants its never-ending rude replies revolved in my brain, slipped through a crack in my mask, deafened my ears and vocalized its cruel message via my mouth before I realized it was too late. "Friends are a commodity and necessity as the situation arises and for those who find individuality difficult." Rita's flaring nostrils and the squeak of her shoes on the tiled floor as she marched away echoed through the walls of my shrunken head, the juices of humanity sucked from its depths. What had made me say such a terrible thing? The whispering voice inside my head that never rests desires that everyone around me feel the irrevocable sense of doom that shrouds my body.

I often wonder why I cannot be the monkey that simply claps its hands and screeches its approval whenever pleased. I would do anything to achieve that state of merriment that allows for smiles, jokes, and the ability to actually converse with others, feel pride in personal advances, and appreciate that which is good. Instead, I think until my head hurts and the nails of the never-ending voice revolve, whistling fears, warning me, "You are mean, temperamental, cruel. Why are you like this? Why do you dislike so many people? You don't deserve anything. You have been given a great life and yet you lash out at everyone. What gives you the right to be depressed? You are no one. No one knows you now, and nobody will remember you long after you're gone. What have you contributed, Jill?"

"Nothing," I reply, frowning, thinking of other people I have been hateful with. I don't speak to my best friend anymore. Four years ago, Carole went away to college and I never forgave her. She was having a great time and I wasn't. I envied her ability to be light-hearted, but I never understood her misconception of reality. She couldn't see beyond the present and lived like tomorrow would never come.

Before Carole left for college, we took a history course together. One day, before class began, she spotted the TV cart in the hall

waiting to be wheeled inside of the room. We both knew that a historical documentary awaited us, plotting its ultimate take-over of the class with the hopes that it could lull the students into a deep trance. Carole threw her books down, whipped the cart around and pulled the connecting wires from the TV to the VCR apart and hooked them up the wrong way, saving us from the beastly machine that threatened our sanity. As the professor struggled with the machine, nearly toppling the TV cart, nervous coughs and grins hidden behind sweating hands saved us from the wrath he exuded upon technology while blaming the student workers for their inability to correctly hook up a TV and VCR. The midterm was the following week, and everyone missed the question on Confucianism. We secretly blamed Carole for exempting us from the movie on Chinese philosophy and religion. As she was blinded by the annoyances of the present, she was unable to perceive the possible and warranted consequences of her hasty decision.

Although Carole was clever enough to steal five points from each student, approximately fifty points total, she didn't understand the concept of reality, nor was she able to abandon her notion that everyone in the world was kind and basically good. The weekend after she left for college, she called me, crying hysterically. "Jill. Oh, God, I am so stupid." *Amen*. "I was having the greatest time down here at a party, but I got so drunk that I followed this guy down into a basement. He said everything was going to be fine, but then he started to grab me. I was scared, but my mind was so fuzzy I couldn't do anything. If someone hadn't come in, I don't know what would have happened. I'm never getting drunk again." Two weeks later a mutual friend informed me that Carole was drinking everyone under the table while her grades slowly descended the escalator of no return. Life hadn't taught her a thing. She unfurled the fingers of remembrance, the echoes of the past that grip the brain and squeeze it as they hope to invoke memory and the unforgettable pain of experience.

As for myself, life enlightens me through others. Carole and Rita are zombies, part of the living-dead, wandering through life with roses in their mouths and ribbons around their necks, the dancing red daisies with fuzzy brown eyes morphing into lizards behind their backs. They cannot understand that I am trapped inside a crystal jar, smothered by the stench of salty blood and echoing screams that fill me with

horror and an intense dread as I see myself in a world of emerald clouds and gardenias.

“Joppy.”

“Hmm?” Jarrod’s jocularly means that I will again be the butt of a joke or I must participate in one of his antics unless I want to risk having him yank the recliner while I’m in it, my heart lurching as my arms and legs flail in the air wildly until he decides to stop rocking the chair.

“Ready?” he asks, his face mere inches from mine. “Da-duh da-duh duh duh duh,” he sings, nodding his head sharply with each syllable. I try to hold back a smile, but the melody from *M*A*S*H* is unmistakable. As I pick up the next series of da-duhs, the voice inside of me fades, the absurdity of singing a TV theme song at midnight making me shriek with laughter and forget everything but keeping the tune. Jarrod grabs his guitar and finds the chords. The song comes alive, but quickly changes. My da-duhs disappear as I recognize the notes to “American Pie.” He strums as I sing the words, “something touched me deep inside the day the music died.” Jarrod stops strumming, swings the guitar over his shoulder and leaves the room quietly.

I smile, realizing that Jarrod is right. Without the meaningless everyday happenings in my life, the small things that make me laugh or force me to evaluate myself as a person within a chaotic world of worry and regret, the stalking hypnotic Brontosaurus would slurp the vegetation from the murky, stagnate pond of self-worth that swirls swiftly around my senses. The ones living for today, people like Rita and my old friend are the counter-selves, the ones reminding us that we should be thankful we’re not in their disillusioned state. People like my brother keep the music alive, dancing with those out of step with the world. Without those living for the moment or the ones spreading contagious happy delirium, there is no music, no rest for the ones with voices that never cease.

Urophobia and the Pursuit of Happiness

Jonas Shamel

There have been few constants throughout the course of human history. Before entering the sacred realm of adolescence, boys are tested to prove their manhood. For many members of Native American tribes, boys wander the woods alone for three days, taking nothing but the clothes on their bodies. They have to fend for themselves. Those boys who do not pass the test are shunned by their tribe, unless a bear eats them. With today's urban youth, the rite of passage involves being "jumped in" by several of his peers in order to be deemed worthy to join their gang. In this case, the boy must defend himself from his attackers or be ostracized by them. Sometimes, even young girls are subject to this type of test. For some upper middle class youth, this rite of passage is delayed until they reach eighteen or nineteen years of age. The so-called "initiation" involves the elders of a secret organization subjecting young men to cruel and demeaning acts. These men must endure whatever punishment is dealt to gain the privilege of purchasing friendship. Whatever the case may be, the family and/or peer group pressures the individual to submit to the terms of the test. Those who fail the test are deemed weak and immature. They are then ostracized from the social groups they so desperately cling to for identity. In examining these rituals, we must ask ourselves: Is it right to subject these youngsters to these cruel tests in order for them to prove their manhood? Would it make them any less of a man if these practices were omitted? Do these practices leave some sort of psychological scarring?

Every ten-year-old boy's dream is to see his heroes in all their glory. For me, it was the infamous Cleveland Browns of the 1980s. They were terrible. The quarterback ran like an ostrich when chased out of the pocket. The uniforms were poop brown and the helmets were the same shade of orange used on cones in road construction areas. They were the white trash of the National Football League, a decade before the Dallas Cowboys starting lineup became junkies. Most sports fans in Ohio remember "The Drive." Our beloved Browns were driving up the field to thrust the proverbial stake through the heart of our sworn enemy, the Denver Broncos. They were two yards away

from winning the game and heading off to the Super Bowl. The ball was handed off to the running back where he fumbled it. Denver recovered and marched up the field ninety-eight yards to win the game. They weren't the worst team in the league. Most seasons, they made the playoffs. When challenged by the Broncos, they buckled. None of this would have mattered to a ten-year-old boy, but I was no ordinary boy. I was a man in training. I knew all the stats and read the sports columns like all men did. I could easily hold my own in a sports related conversation with other men. When given the opportunity to attend a game, I jumped at the chance to watch my heroes, and of course analyze the game.

The season was coming to a close. That year was dismal for us men who paid attention to the standings. The end result was a 3-13 record. That didn't stop dear old Dad and me from skipping church to drive two hours up to Lake Erie. Excitement pulsed through my brain as we journeyed up to see my Sunday afternoon heroes slay the forces of evil. My face beamed as we approached the stadium. I kept jumping out of my seat as we circled the stadium in search of a parking space. Cleveland's baseball team's mascot, Chief Wahoo, greeted us first with his six-foot teeth and triangle shaped eyes. A sixty foot football player with no face mask, charged at us on the other side of the ancient coliseum. Inside, Cleveland Municipal Stadium was a concrete cave. It seated around one hundred thousand, but the games played here rarely filled half of those. The wind blowing in from Canada chilled even the heartiest man. It could be 105 degrees in the shade and it was still necessary to wear a sweater. After sitting for about five minutes, most bottoms in the stadium would be aching from contact with the dated bleachers. These seats were cracked and splintery to the touch. No one seemed to mind though. If one was a true fan, and a real man as well, he would endure the pain and the hypothermia just for the opportunity to watch the Browns somehow blow a five touchdown lead in the fourth quarter to force the game into overtime.

It was nearing the end of the first half, and so far, the game was pretty good. My dad was enjoying a beer while I partook of a steaming cup of cocoa. The brown, flavorless liquid burned my tongue until it was starting to blister. I was a man, though; I could take it. With the exception of my tongue, every part of my body was numb.

The sudden urge to urinate hit me all at once, but there were only five minutes left until halftime. I could easily hold it for what was left of the first half. So I waited. Anyone who has ever watched a football game knows that the final minutes of the two halves are the longest. My focus was beginning to shift more from the behemoths on the gridiron to the pressure that kept building in my bladder. What started as a minor distraction was rapidly turning into a dam ready to burst. The bitter cold added to my troubles. Like a man would, I bit my lip and held it. I wanted to prove to myself that I was a man. Even if I died trying to hold it, at least I would have the satisfaction of knowing that I was no longer a boy.

Both teams were heading to the sidelines for a timeout. I looked at the game clock. Four more minutes to wait. "I can do this," I thought to myself. A little relief came to my gorged bladder. With that, play had resumed. A chorus of boos erupted from the crowd as our enemy burst through the goal to score a touchdown. I was getting desperate. I tried to say something to my dad, but the noise was too great for him to hear. The zebra clad referees huddled together as the crowd quieted to a dull roar. The game clock froze while the play was being reviewed. Three minutes and eighteen seconds remained. I began to fidget uncontrollably. After a minute or so, my father noticed this. "What's the matter?" he asked. I simply replied, "Nothin'." With a look of disbelief he responded, "Do you have to go to the bathroom?" "Uh . . . Yeah! But I can hold it!" Satisfied with the answer I gave him, he finished his beer.

Finally, the clock had resumed its ticking. The play was overruled. There would be no touchdown for our enemies. The Browns got the ball back, then proceeded to drive up the field. I was starting to focus less on my swollen bladder and more on the game. The louder the people around me got, the louder I yelled. They did the wave, and I jumped ten feet in the air at each pass. The clock had stopped for the two-minute warning. My body reminded me again that I needed a timeout as well. I only had two more minutes to last, and neither team had a timeout; with a television timeout, I would have five minutes, tops. I would do my time and run to the men's room once the gun sounded. I would be a man, and the Browns would win the game. What a perfect day this was turning out to be!

People began to rise from their splintered planks and head to the concourse. That was not a good sign. I might damage something “down there” if I were to wait in line too long. Finally, the clock began to tick with the swiftness of a three-toed sloth. My bladder was throbbing from the pressure applied on it. I glanced at the game clock more frequently. This was going to kill me. I had accepted that fact. Even so, I was going to die a man. That was satisfaction enough for me. Fifteen seconds remained on the clock. An enemy was down and would not move. A referee and some team doctors came out to attend to him. I could wait no longer. At that point, I had to swallow my manly pride and ask my father to escort me to the toilets. “Why didn’t you just say so?”

So, we walked to the restroom. Males of all ages, colors, and sizes walked in and out. They exchanged no words. With my father close behind me, I walked eagerly into the restroom. What stood before me I will never forget until my dying day. Ten men were hunched up against these long tubs, holding themselves. These tubs resembled troughs that pigs eat out of. Their white porcelain glistened in the ultraviolet hum of 1920s innovation. They measured about five feet in length. The width came in a little under two feet. A steady stream of water flowed through each trough. I looked back at my dad in astonishment as he nudged me along. I stepped up to the trough, my father there to give me support. I was mashed in there with nine other gentlemen at a urinal that was probably built for five. This is where the journey into manhood officially began.

I had already been briefed on the rules of bathroom etiquette in grade school. The number one rule that was never, ever broken without serious consequences: **Don’t Look Down!** Unless it was on fire, you never, ever looked down. At age ten, it was the worst thing to be called a fag by your peers. This type of label was usually accompanied by severe beatings. The second rule was: If you saw a kid in one of the stalls “dropping some kids off at the pool,” you either a) threw wadded up wet toilet paper at him or b) tried to make him fall in. If there were bigger kids in the restroom, you exit promptly or be prepared to suffer immensely. You never questioned these rules; you just abided by them. Any infraction would result in swift and severe punishment.

With these rules in mind, I proceeded to do my business. I unzipped and unleashed. I kept my head straightforward, focusing on the dingy white cinderblock wall. An interesting piece of graffiti caught my attention. Still facing forward, I asked my father, "What's a blowjob?" I was cut off by the barbed-wire stares of the nine others. Damnit! Not another rule! We could always talk in the boy's room at school. I wanted desperately to say "Sorry! I'm still in training," but another infraction would cost me dearly. This was getting tough.

On top of all that, I was suffering from a bad case of stage fright. There were no protective barriers to shield me from the other men's membership cards, no whoosh from the urinal to break the eardrum shattering silence, and no cute little cakes to aim for. I tried to reason with it. If I were by myself, I would have probably cussed at it to let it know that I meant business. Nothing happened. I couldn't walk away. I tried picturing the sprinkler in the backyard to no avail. The entire lower half of my body ached from holding in so much liquid.

"C'mon, C'mon," I whispered to it. I felt a little tingle as it began to happen. I looked down to make sure I wasn't just imagining it. Oh, Damnit! I looked down! I swear I could feel it being sucked back in as if it were a shop vac. I watched some men leave and a few more stepped up to take their place. I was humiliated. None of them took an hour to do this. All that I had to do was pee in a tub to prove that I was a true man. I had failed the test. I was not a man. I wasn't even a man in training. A single tear rolled down my cheek, further proving my point.

I was at the lowest point of my life. In Asian cultures past, it was better to die than live with dishonor. I probably would have drowned myself in one of the feces clogged toilets if I weren't such a wuss. That would have spared my family some disgrace. The only chance I had left was a little divine intervention. So very quietly, I began to pray. "Please God, let me pee. I've been real good lately, so will you please let me pee? O.K., so I missed church today. Does that really make me a bad person? I am begging you, O Lord, please let me pee!" Then I took a deep breath, tilted my head back, and pictured Niagara Falls. It started to happen. The dam finally burst. It was the closest thing my ten-year-old body had come to an orgasm.

The game ended up in a tie that day. My dad and I didn't speak the rest of the afternoon. As we were heading home, he broke the silence:

It was hard for me the first time pissing in one of those damn troughs. I was about nine.

So how did you do?

About as miserable as you! (laughs)

(smiling) Yeah, I failed. I feel like such a wuss.

Why?

I thought I could be a man. I'm not even a man in training.

You didn't fail. A real man isn't afraid to admit stuff like that. A real man can say he has a weakness.

I wasn't sure what he was talking about at the time. To be honest, I was probably only half listening. Like everything else, I never questioned it. I made up my mind that day that if this is what it took to be a man, I wanted to be a kid a little while longer.

Adrenaline Harvest

Brooke Wilson

Kaleidoscopes of colored strobe lights tickled my vision immediately upon walking through the doors. I was momentarily mesmerized, but shook my focus and cast it down on the heads gyrating below. Lowering myself down from the aisle into the chaotic composition of flailing appendages would never be an easy task, and this time was no exception. I slid down with the feeling of a child sliding a timid foot into blurry-dark, undetermined waters. My body now inside, but still barely one of the mingled mass. I slumped back against the reverberating wall and let the atmosphere take hold.

Energy flowed from the core. The center of this beautiful chaos rolled off waves of vibe that reached me in lapping ripples. It was as if a rock had been thrown in a pond; even in the back row I felt it, yet it was still barely tangible to the senses. Being there, on the outer edge, the energy churned in the base of my stomach and gave me a taste of what the crowd had to offer. Manic adrenaline.

I had my preferred perch while the hideously obvious Village People throwback band finished their set. I was content to remain slumped against the back wall. There I could still be in the picture, but not so immersed that I lost my ability to realize I was in a picture at all. Impatient words were soon hurled from the crowd at the over-ripe band, like rumbles from the belly of a beast hungry for quick fixes and loud music. The energy had violent undercurrents. Annoyed by the clanging lack of talent, my impatience bubbled over and I began to shift. The floor seemed offended by my futile attempt to move to higher ground. It clutched and grasped at my rubber soles with unshakable dried-beer fingers, each move I made emphasized by the *GRRAACHing* sounds of its protest.

I was once again Switzerland. I stood in the middle, packed between the ascending seats and bodies behind me and the people on foot that swim and contort on the floor in front of me. I subconsciously (or was it?) placed myself neutrally, as I often do, where I can't feel too marginalized or too affected. It seems logical - the perfect placement in any situation. In this position, I can always be watching. I don't have to mingle with people or offer any silly anecdotes that I feel I should

when small-talking with someone. At the same time, I am not so removed from the situation that I forfeit the option to. I can just gauge the situation, not committing myself to either sect through superficial conversation or voluntary isolation. It's an engrained character flaw, an indecision that defiles me.

Their set having come to a close, the noxious band muttered some meager sentiment on their behalf and gave a "thank you" that fell on deaf ears. Energy ebbed as restless thrill seekers plowed their way up from the pit, annoyed that the band hadn't harvested as much adrenaline as they hoped for and in search of more beer to feed the floor. The opportunity for moving forward waved us up with a persuasive hand. With our cigarettes like beacons in front of us, we gained ground through the mist of smoke and the unrelenting clutches of viscid floor. We ended our advance with only one string of people to separate us from the flimsy metal fence that corralled the audience from the stage and the band.

The tide of crowd began to roll back in, filling the void in the floor with over-zealous parasites ready to feed off the energy of the next anticipated band. Arm movement was quickly becoming an irrational possibility, and personal identity became blurred as the crowd coagulated into a mesh of elbows, hands, heads, and legs. The closeness alone emitted a self-contained energy of dormant panic. The lights dimmed and strobe light eyes blinked in syncopation as Incubus took the stage. Bursting howls and yells answered their arrival, some from awareness and others from carefree oblivion.

We had waited for this.

The churning in the base of my stomach darted upwards, tickling the back of my neck, and erupted from my mouth in a vocal volcano of anticipation. My neutral ground was lost and I succumbed to the vibrations of the music and the crowd. New Skin quenched our anxious thirst and the inner belly of the pit began to growl. When the song would peak, the crowd would answer the call by matching the climax with a pick-a-mix of darting elbows, shoving hands, and youthful angst. My recollections of this offer me still-frames of memory, strung together like those consecutive pulses of the strobe light. Each one revealing a composition of faces and bodies more jostled than a Picasso painting.

We were surged forward by the antics as each person was vacuumed into another. In such close quarters, the energy tidal waved from the stage into this nucleus, and was eagerly passed from the one smashing body to the next at a choking speed. I soon attempted to find my anchor, someone to absorb the shock of the eager crowd that was propelling me forward. Limited room to breathe found me using a mammoth, clove-smoking, slack-jawed guy in front of me to absorb the shock of the bodies against my back.

I rapidly lost my usual sense of boundaries that previously marked my option of evasion. My reality became the people nearest me and the band up front. Feeding so much on the moment, I never looked back to the higher ground behind me. Incubus's set raged on, the uniform bodies of the crowd never failing to harness the vibe and throw it back at the nearest people with a vengeance. My prior passivity gave way to the mutual shoving and elbowing of a mob mentality. The wave had crashed over me and my usual station of a neutral perch was overthrown in the midst of clawing hands and smothering closeness. Their set ended, and with approving yells we left the belly of the pit full as ticks from adrenaline of the scene and ready to breathe again.

We escaped to the balcony, and as System of a Down emerged, I looked down on the network of gyrating heads and limbs we had just been a part of. I was more familiar with this side of the spectrum. The center of adrenaline was easily discerned to be the middle of the crowd by the ripples of outward movement spawning from it. Memories from this vantage point run in a stream of images, unsmearred by participation, of watching the stage and the mesh of crowd below. I had reclaimed my role of outside observer, my insights now somewhat shrouded by prior involvement in the presently observed. The importance of this saturation, immersing myself in a situation, became evident. The electrifying still-frame memories charged my sense of self and the unsmearred whole shaped it. I felt saturated by this renewed sense. I never thought I could have gained a stronger sense of myself from the swarming confines of a mosh pit. I felt full.

Overcoming

Kelle Gabriel

It's July. I'm driving on an unending stream of watery mirages, surfing on, top down. It's a beautiful day, warm, and gentle air is blowing through the hair I've patiently waited to grow over the last three years. And even though the top is down, the air blowing noisily about my ears cannot drown out the crisp and clear transcending sound of Dave Matthews' "Lie in Our Graves." I'm driving, in the middle of nowhere, searching for some place. It's going to be a long drive, and I'm not really sure where I'll end up. But there is a smile on my face that no amount of negativity can distort. I feel a complete sense of peace as I'm sitting on top of the world with my legs hanging free alongside Dave Matthews.

Hi, Mommy.

One eye opens. I pause for a moment. The other eye opens. There sits the distorted figure of Little Man giggling as I see tweety birds spin around my head. Finally, I realize where I am, stretch my limbs, and draw my focus to his poopy green eyes. He's flashing the "good morning, Mom" smile with the ever so lovely patting of my cheek, the smile and caress that says, "I know you have no desire to get out of bed." He is absolutely right. But a hidden sparkle behind those drab colored eyes brings a groggy smile to my face, and I return his wake up call with a whispering.

Good morning, baby.

Before I can even raise my body upward, Matthew is gone. He's ready for Fruity Pebbles, and he's ready for them now. I start for the bedroom door, and he is on his way back to make sure I'm out of bed.

You coming, Mom?

Yes baby, I'm coming.

He skips to the kitchen in total enthusiasm. It's 8:25 in the ever so early morning, there's no doubt I'm sleep walking, and my son is alive and wired for sound. I open the pantry, grab the cereal, and begin to fix his breakfast almost as if I'm in a drunken stupor. And the whole time he's talking.

You fixin me cereal mom? Huh mom? You gettin me somepun?

My slumbering mind cannot translate his two-year-old talk fast enough, and I cut him off.

YES MATT MAN! Chill out for a minute.

No, you chill out, Mom.

I barely get his kid size Winnie the Pooh spoon in his bowl.

Mom, I want to watch a mooovie. Mom, you put *Toy Story* in for me? Please, Mom.

Yes, Matthew, give Mommy just a minute.

O-kaaaaaay.

His voice is sarcastic as he draws out the "kay." He's not even three yet, and he's full of personality and attitude. I stumble over to the VCR and fumble with the Black Beauty that is my son's addiction. My sin and savior. I pop the movie in, and automatically it begins to play. Thank God. I retreat to my spot on the couch and reach for my sobriety. My backpack. Fall quarter is coming to a close, not to mention my energy, motivation, and patience. I'm tired--physically, mentally, and emotionally. I reach into that ten ton weight I slap over my shoulders daily and pull out a copy of *Native Son*. It's the most recent novel being read for Anne Bower's 20th Century Fiction class and the longest novel for the class. I open the book, and I'm about to jump off the diving board into page 243.

Uh-oh.

I look up, and Matthew has spilled his juice on the floor. I knew then, at 8:56am that it was going to be a very long, very trying day.

For a short time, all is peaceful and I'm able to focus on my reading. My silence is shattered.

I sorry Mommy.

With eyes shut, I lower the book while every nerve in my spinal column begins to fray. I look to see the apology as a whole glass of Strawberry Banana V-8 Splash lay in an orange puddle on my already stained, used-to-be-nice carpet. The fraying of nerves counters a minor explosion within, erupting through my mouth. I instantly scold Matthew with impatience and gruffness, but the accidental moment ends with a serious, yet understanding request.

Please be careful.

I return to my reading. Before I know it, the credits of *Toy Story* are rolling as Matthew begins to sing.

You got friend n me.

I haven't the chance to utter a sound or make a move.

I want to watch it again.

I have no quarrels with his request, and I pick up the remote control, hit stop, and then rewind.

Is Buzz almost here, Mom? I watch Buzz again? Huh, Mom? Huh?

I look up at him with the "you're getting on my nerves glare" and use my sharp "you better get a grip" voice.

MATTHEW!

He knows the look and he knows the tone. He settles. The movie resumes and so does my reading. While watching his favorite movie for the second time, Matthew decides he will quote every line.

Fin and yond. I Buzz Yightyear. I come in peece.

I try not to say anything because for the most part, he's really not doing anything wrong. Mid movie, Little Man decides he will play with toys at the same time. I'm content, he's entertaining himself, and I'm getting some studying done. Fifteen minutes left to go in the show, I pause to "check in," and every toy imaginable is strung throughout my living room, accompanied by half eaten strawberry Pop Tarts. I take a look around my house and grow even more tired at the thought of clean up. I inform Matthew as soon as the movie is over that he is going to pick up his toys. He looks at me with disgust and begins whining. I explain that there is no need to have so much out all at once. He argues with me, and I again give him the look and tone, which usually cure him the first time around. It isn't working. Not only was it going to be a rough and tiring day of schoolwork, but my son and I are going to butt heads the entire day as well. This doesn't happen often, and today was not the day for mother/son combat. I am already fighting other battles. Single motherhood, graduating, bills.

We manage to argue the remaining 15 minutes of the movie.

That's it. It's time to get these toys picked up.

No response.

Let's get these toys picked up, please.

No response.

If I have to ask you one more time to start picking up your toys, you're going to get spanked.

Response.

Not right now, Mom.

He turns away from me, 33 inches tall in defiance. With that I spring from the couch like a wildcat after its prey, snatch him up, and smack the back of his leg until there is a glowing red indentation of my hand. He wails in pain, the tears begin to pour, he falls into my arms, immediately melting into me. I hold him tight while he sobs and whimpers, and a whole new pain emerges as my heart begins to break. I could feel huge puddles filling the bottoms of my eyes, transforming themselves into steady streaming waterfalls down both sides of my face. I gently stroke the back of his cowlicked head, rocking back and forth.

Mommy is so sorry. I'm so sorry, baby.

He lay lifeless in my arms. My god, what have I done? A few moments later, Matthew slowly crawled out of my lap like a car stricken animal, picked up his blanket and binky, and without a glance, turned toward the bedroom.

I sat there for a minute and then scraped myself up off the floor. I went to the bedroom door, peered into the room, and there lay my wounded son curled up on the bed in the fetal position, fast asleep. I went back to the couch and sat there in disbelief of what had just happened. For the first time, I snapped, went completely overboard. Something that happened so fast managed to haunt me for the next two hours while Matthew napped. I've never been consumed by such guilt. I felt like Bigger Thomas in the novel I was reading. Bigger was fighting a battle of racism and poverty. And I'm fighting a battle of single motherhood . . . graduating . . . bills. Just as Bigger saw visions of the girl he accidentally murdered, I saw visions of tears and the look of fear on my son's face. I may not have actually killed anyone, but I definitely wounded the spirit of my son.

Matthew finally woke and tiptoed out of the bedroom, quiet as a mouse. I look up with a smile, a thought in mind.

Would you like to go "bye bye" in a little bit?

Maybe getting out of this one-bedroom hell will be a way of mending. He gives a nodding yes, and after doing a few things around the house, off we go. After running around for awhile, we end up at Perkins for pancakes, bacon, and, of course, chocolate milk. The hostess leads us to a booth and I ask Matthew where he wants to sit. Usually when we go to Perkins Mr. Independent likes to sit by himself, but upon his request we sit together. I take off his coat, and he climbs into the booth. I place our coats in the empty seat across from us and then slide in beside him. There's no need to look at the menu because the order never changes. I move the menus out of the way, and paper and crayons take their place.

Would you like Mommy to draw you a doggy?

It's the only thing mommy can draw besides smiley faces and stick people. I get a nod.

What color do you want Mommy to use?

Ummmm - green.

I take the green crayon and begin drawing Matthew his doggy. The waitress stops by the table and asks what we'd like to drink.

Do you want chocolate milk?

Yes, peez.

I request Diet Coke and our game of pictionary continues. Matthew is scribbling about the paper in his favorite crayon color--red.

Whatcha drawin'?

A helicopter.

Really!? That's pretty neat.

Tank you mommy.

You're welcome, baby.

The waitress returns with our drinks and I give her our order while putting a straw in Matthew's chocolate milk. Kid pancakes with bacon for him, Denver omelet with pancakes and twinberry syrup for me. For the most part, we were carrying on our usual Perkins routine, yet there was something very unroutine going on. Even though Matthew had asked to sit with me it felt like he was far away. He was pretty quiet and not offering up conversation like usual. I couldn't help but feel the afternoon was not yet behind us. We had been there about twenty minutes when a lady approached our table.

I just want you to know that you have the most beautiful, most well behaved child I think I've ever seen. You must be one incredible mother.

I thanked her with utmost sincerity for the compliment, and as she turned with her husband toward the exit, a silent, steady stream of tears rolled down my already stained cheeks without warning. Matthew stood up in the booth and reached out his tiny hand touching my tears.

Peez don't cry.

I look again into those poop green eyes emitting that same sparkle from early morning and give a sigh while Little Man pats my cheek.

I love you, mommy. Bunches and bunches.

Without a doubt, I have traveled farther today than that watery highway of my early morning dream could have ever taken me.

I love you too, baby.

A Lonely Soul

Jennifer Neville

*"...the inertia of loneliness
a miserable force" – Jewel*

As I sit in this cold room, I am reminded of a transition in my life. The way I used to be is not something I am proud of or even like to admit. I can remember the person who changed all of this like it was only a short time ago. Looking all around me I see pictures of her and all of her friends. I see the picture where she was crowned homecoming queen. I see Julie's senior picture. She is standing against a tree with her long hair flowing over her shoulders. There is a picture at the prom with Julie and her closest friends. While I remained seated in my row, I see the same faces that were in all of the pictures. The faces today are not smiling though. They are without expression, faces turned into blank stares, pale skin.

I had seen Julie Richardson every day since kindergarten. She was like an angel in everyone's eyes and was everything I ever wanted to be. All through our school years, we had many classes together. Julie always seemed so perfect to me, and I knew that she had the most exciting life of anyone at Lincoln High. She was perfection from head to toe and everyone knew it. She had beautiful golden brown hair, which was straight and came to a halt just above her waistline. The one feature I've always remembered about Julie was her amazing green eyes, emeralds with an occasional speck of hazel.

I always figured Julie was guaranteed success in life. Her father was a well-respected businessman and was very active in the community. Her mother was a teacher, and everyone who was in Mrs. Richardson's classes couldn't help but adore her. Their families had lived in Delaware all of their lives, and her parents were high school sweethearts. Her mother was the homecoming queen at the same high school where Julie would later accept the same honor. I guess Julie was just expected to have success in life and follow in her mother's footsteps. Julie never seemed to mind having to live up to someone's expectations. She must have thought of it as carrying on the Richardson tradition. She was constantly smiling and always high spirited. I thought

Julie was perfect in every way and never had to deal with any problems. Julie was a cheerleader all through high school, and she was also our class president senior year. On Fridays, she would wear her cheerleading uniform and perform at the pep rally before the game. For most of the guys at Lincoln high, Julie was the pinnacle of desire. Every guy wanted to take Julie out, and she would always say no because she was dating a college guy.

I, of course, didn't even know what second base was. Guys never noticed me, and I even had to drag my cousin to my junior prom. I was not much to look at in high school with my short haircut and tomboy looks. I always had a pretty face; however, I didn't quite have the body. I was short and very skinny with a virtually non-existent chest. The wonderful "miracle bra" couldn't even help the situation. I was also not the most popular girl in high school, but I always wanted to be. Sure, I was in clubs like student government, and I also joined the choir. Not many people ever noticed who I was or even bothered to care. I was more or less a plain Jane, and by high school, I had learned to accept that.

I can still remember the first time Julie talked to me. Our senior year, Julie and I had History class together. This was the last period right after lunch, at which point I was able to go home like the other seniors. Every day, about halfway through class, Julie would ask to be excused. I just figured that she would call her college boyfriend and make plans for the evening. During class one afternoon, Julie asked to be excused, as usual. I had to use the restroom and also asked to be excused. Both of our requests were permitted, and we left the classroom. I was walking behind Julie when she turned the corner and opened the door to the women's restroom. Just as the door shut behind her, I looked down to find that she had dropped something. I recognized the label and realized that what I was holding in my hand were diet pills.

The girls' restroom was poorly lit and slowly falling apart. The walls were missing tiles, the old glue was visible which had turned a dirty yellow color. The sinks were dripping and never seemed to turn off all the way. Julie's white cheerleading shoes peered out from under the stall. As I walked closer, I could hear a faint weeping. I couldn't imagine that the weeping was Julie. After all, she had nothing to cry about. I

looked under the stalls and saw that only one was occupied. Perhaps she had a bad breakup with her boyfriend and just needed time to herself.

As I was leaving, I heard my name being called. Could this be true that Julie actually knew who I was? I turned to face the stall where Julie was and replied, "Julie, is that you?" She answered very quietly and asked if I could listen to her. I asked what she needed and what she replied I'll never forget: "I was wondering if you could sit with me and listen to me talk. All I want is for someone to listen to me." By this time, I was standing with my back against the stall where Julie was. I prepared myself to listen and slowly slid down the stall until I was sitting on the cold, damp floor. The room suddenly became very chilly, and I shivered a little.

I could hear the tremors in her voice as she slowly talked. "My parents are getting a divorce and it is tearing apart my family."

"Mine are divorced, too, Julie. I know how you must feel." I tried to comfort her, not really knowing what to say. Not only were her parents getting divorced, but her perfect college boyfriend had broken up with her.

"I hate my life, I wish I were someone else." As I listened to her talk through her tears, I felt relieved. Julie was not perfect. Knowing that Julie had problems like everyone else made me feel like I was no longer unlike her. I knew we would never be friends, but I knew we would have a bond that not many people have. We had an understanding of each other, and I was glad for this. More importantly, though, Julie was someone I had based every other girl around. I no longer needed to do this. That day when I went home, I sat in my room and thought. I thought about a lot of things that mostly revolved around Julie. For some reason, I couldn't comprehend that someone like Julie Richardson had problems. The whole time I had known Julie I had been admiring a lie. I was so naive to think that there was someone out there who was perfect in every way.

After that day in the restroom, Julie and I never spoke again. The next day, Julie was not in history class. I wondered if she would be okay and hoped that her family situation would get better. That evening I found the bottle of pills Julie had dropped. Clenching the brown plastic bottle, I felt betrayed and even angry that I believed Julie was perfect. I

had to give the pills back and see if maybe there was anything else she needed to talk about. Yet, I convinced myself that the real reason was because I wanted to see the real Julie again.

The next morning when I arrived at school, there were swarms of people everywhere. I had never realized how many people were actually at this school until they were all gathered together. Finally, I made it to my homeroom where people were crying and talking to each other. I had so much on my mind with Julie that I didn't understand or care why people were upset. Our principal came on the loud speaker and sounded as if she, too, had been crying. She started talking about Julie and what a wonderful person she was. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Julie had died last night, and I didn't even realize what was going on. She swallowed thirty sleeping pills and never woke up.

Even now, as I sit at Julie's funeral, I can't really believe she is gone and not coming back. The perfect girl who I thought could never have a trouble in the world actually had more than I imagined. The smiling faces would be smiling no more. Julie's death was a shock for everyone who knew her. The blank stares and pale faces, including my own, so disbelieving. But as I look at the pictures of Julie's beautiful face, I begin to understand. Maybe no one is capable of being perfect. Julie tried so hard to be perfect in her parents' eyes, and her peers' as well. She could no longer take the pressure put on her every day of her life. There are many people today who are like Julie, trying so hard to please others. Julie was special, but she never knew how special.

Snow Tao

Douglas Lewis

What is it that makes one morning bright and another dark?

Why is it that today I notice the cold slowly and feel nothing of myself in its presence? My breath leaves me in little hovering clouds. I watch each as it seems to rush first, then stumble, fall, and eventually rise again. Why does breath rise, I wonder?

Standing in the open cold, I feel immune to the world. Nature can be violent, burning and freezing in rotation, but this same violence makes the outside world so appealing. My memory of old pain is pushed away by the immediate struggle to overcome the environment, to refuse to surrender despite the needle pricks of each gust of wind as they move steadily through my clothes and into my blood. Eventually the idea that I'm freezing passes away into numbness. After numbness has passed, it is even possible, there in the blue snow, to feel warm, but today I don't even feel cold. I only begin to know the cold.

The difficult thing about winter isn't the drop in the mercury, but the wind that holds it down. The wind carries the cold into my lungs and drowns out every other sound in its own cries. In Taoism, students are told to be like the wind: have no substance, no direction, and you will overcome anything. There is no conquering the wind. Each gust, to a person raised on such ideas, is a prayer and a vehicle of prayer. To send blessings and hope, one need only tie a prayer flag in the breeze and wait. Just wait. The wind itself is the answer to the prayer, and eventually the luckiest among us will forget what they're waiting for.

When I was still just a very little boy, I heard my first "Zen" story. It began with a common enough image, that of a monk walking home. On the way, he was spotted by a tiger, but lucky for the monk, he, too, had seen the animal. His first instinct was to run, but the tiger chased after him. He would have been overtaken and eaten except that he came to the edge of a cliff with a vine hanging over the side. The vine looked like it would hold his weight (not that he really had a choice), and there was nothing of any danger below. So the monk grabbed hold and started to climb down, looking up at the hungry tiger as he descended. Not until he was about halfway down did the monk

feel confident in his escape and look away from his stalker above. Beneath him, at the bottom of the cliff, sat another tiger, just arrived, and as hungry as the first. Above, two mice began to gnaw at the vine at just the place where it hung over the cliff edge, the vine being the favorite food of the mice of the region.

In school (I think I must have been in the fourth grade by this time), I used to tell myself this story over and over. I could run through the majority of it six or seven times in music class alone, envisioning each event in even the slightest detail, but something always seemed to pull me out of it at just the moment when the monk was hanging there, on the vine, confronted with death. Perhaps I noticed things around me and allowed myself to be distracted by them because I wanted to avoid the story's conclusion. Thoughts of death were not on my list of interesting topics to use against boredom. But eventually I confronted the ending and was able to see death in a new way. I came to suspect that the instant of greatest awakening, for most people, must be that same moment when the nearness of death has made itself known and only the whatever-it-is-that-lies-beyond truly lies beyond.

Winter is its own sort of near death experience. The light reflecting up off the snow, blinding me, is the light at the end of the tunnel. The event of standing in the cold is, in time, an awakening to the cold itself, to the cold beyond perceptions of the cold. This is why I wait here, feeling that I'll freeze at times, but confident that in facing down numbness and everything after, I might come to know something greater than either myself or the biting wind. In the last minutes of living, I suspect, and in standing so long in the winter, the final scene of the tiger story begins to make some sense.

As I pictured that poor monk the first time I heard this story, trapped there between two tigers, with mice chewing away at the vines, stealing even the option of trying to wait out the animals, I had expected that he would be saved, that he would escape. What actually happened is that he noticed just below him, on the cliff face, a small patch of wild strawberries. He lowered himself down to the fruit and tasting one commented "how delicious." This is where the story ends, which I found very confusing. Really, it seemed to be one of the most ridiculous stories I'd ever heard. We aren't even told if he survived, though I've always assumed that he did not. Eventually I came to understand that

his survival isn't the important part, it is that he was able to overcome his fears (or his hopes, if you prefer) and open himself to the potential of the moment. Had he spent his last minutes preoccupied with his fate, he would have missed his one final joy. Even later it occurred to me that to be able to live completely in just a single instant involves more of the real stuff of life than most of us experience in years upon years.

Society favors those who conform and warns us by multitudes of examples that those unwilling to conform will be cast out as failures. Yet, only in abandoning this system, in refusing to make myself conform, is it possible to understand the lessons and beauty of the moment. Only in accepting the tigers, though society and teaching rail against it, is it possible to notice strawberries. How else is it possible, I ask those who doubt this, to know the moment (and thus all moments) when we are afraid of the past or preoccupied with the future, when the esteem we want so much to hold in the eyes of society colors our understanding of anything else? Desire is the most difficult trap to overcome. We are told from childhood that certain things are worth pursuing, that if only we had such-and-such a thing or were seen as being such-and-such a person, would we be happy. The chase, though, is never ending, and failing to reach the ultimate goal can lead to anger at being denied, or fear of never succeeding. Sadly, simply knowing that we are trapped by our desires does not immediately free one from them. I want to escape desire, but the mere fact that I *want* to escape, in fact, traps me no less than *wanting* admiration or *wanting* a new car. In forgetting that I am separate from the cold and the wind, as time allows, I move ever so slightly from the constraints of desire and toward an appreciation of the moment. Only in sitting nearly motionless and waiting, or for those who can, in abandoning their own desirous nature without such training, do goals, and the desires that shape them, become unimportant. When I begin to accept that there is nothing but this waiting, to abandon a desire put off so long by the waiting, it is at that point that the idea of bothering with society becomes ridiculous. What have I to gain by it? Whether I am liked, loved, misunderstood, or ignored doesn't change my waiting in the least.

Standing in the midst of winter, waiting, I begin to move from my expectations (hopes) that eventually something will happen. I notice

that around me there is the lightest dust of snow. I look as deeply as I can into a few little flakes as they swirl around me, within each I start to recognize a sun, a meaning to finding one's self between two hungry tigers. When I let myself go, to sort of spread out into the season, I gain a sensitivity to even the smallest things. I watch each flake as it glints and sparkles its way, casually, to the ground. At first I can barely feel those which land in my hands, but then (it seems very quickly) I begin to feel them as soft little taps. From taps to explosions, the snow reveals itself as a dominating thing. Its quiet melting and falling away into drops from my fingers seems a model for experiencing life. There is nothing rigid about snow. It does not break and is not destroyed because it has no attachment to its form. At this point, I am overcome by the sudden fear of losing myself too much in this one sensation. I draw back.

A problem with progress, even in spiritual matters, is that it is easy to become too confident. I confuse present desires with future results and see what I want to see. Looking up, I might fool myself into seeing summer above me, of seeing the seed of summer in winter. The sky is a very light shade with just a few clouds moving through like little ships. I look down and there are the last remains of fall poppies. Their orange paper is long gone, but there is still just a bit of green in the matted leaves. The old stalks are scattered but still straight. All of these remind me of something warm, even in the midst of all the present cold. I would like to say that this is a sign of my seeing the true importance or value of each, of understanding interconnectedness, but really it is just another form of attachment to an idea of the ideal. Even that I see ships in the clouds betrays my difficulty in seeing a thing as it truly is. I can't understand the clouds or even really see them for the illusion separating me from them. I miss the dry flowers for dwelling on my wish that they might still be just opened and warm, even though I mask my desire in clothes of understanding the cycle of nature. The cold is covered in preferences, and so I miss whatever I might have found in it. There is a long quiet in all of these things, if only I could hear it.

Enlightenment, I think, must come in little bursts. I see the value and purpose of so much around me, of the grass holding the yard together in the wind and the dog providing the yard with food to continue. I really do understand something of interconnectedness, just not as much as I sometimes like to claim. I know that Enlightenment would

mean seeing not just the physical connections but the deeper connections of each thing as a piece of the Tao (the ONE whole of everything). I miss so much, as if I've developed an understanding of the concept of gears but still can't quite connect this with why the hands of the clock continue on and on. Even what little understanding I have is only of the periphery. The exterior details come to me, but I miss the larger picture that would bring me in on why all these details matter. Maybe they don't matter and that's the point. Maybe my whole approach is off. Should I distance myself from all of this, not just my wants and fears, but the scene itself? I don't think that would help. If the truth exists at all, it must surely exist in everything, and I've seen a little of it myself. I've had fleeting glimpses of something deeper; it's just holding the understanding that's so difficult.

Once, while driving, I saw a telephone pole clearing out of the fog as I approached. I saw that the two, the pole and the mist, were really one. Literally, they appeared to blend into each other, but it struck me that they must also blend into each other on a much deeper level. I wondered at what point the pole would end and the fog begin. Even more startling was the question of when the *idea* of the pole ends and the *idea* of the fog begins. How is my perception different from the reality? Even in just being able to frame the question, I saw something more of what the answer might hold.

This process, standing here watching and trying so hard not to think, to understand the very complex simplicity around me that is also a part of me, this is the key to understanding an instant. If only I could make it last and take it with me. What it must be like to eat in this peace, to write and talk and walk, but I know that soon it will be gone again and the world will regain its boundaries and I will regain my desires. It may be that I have nothing to do today, or that the sky is bright, or that I am standing in the cold air and have come to the point where I don't care. Any of these things could be the cause for this morning seeming so perfect as I stand here in the presence of all these little details that give life to the stillness, but like storm clouds blotting out the sun, this very temporary wisdom of place and continuing will pass. Very soon questions of the divine will again seem unimportant, even arrogant. Why might one morning seem bright and another dark? It is

not the light itself, or even the setting, but the slowness, the time to sit without thinking, to learn from nothingness, the time to later try to understand what was so obvious in the instant. The light must be everywhere, if only I would see it. Every morning is this morning, but I move too fast to know it.

Wrong Way on a One Way Track

Jason Lichtenberger

"My father is an asshole!" I have been screaming this sentence repeatedly for the past twenty minutes. "My father is an asshole!" The more I say these words, the angrier I become. I pick up a golf ball-sized rock off the roadside and heave it into a wheat field of gold beside me. The rock is lost in the luminous rays of the fading sun before I hear it slap against the moist earth. The action of throwing a rock no longer satisfies my appetite to vent my anger as it once did. Growing up, I could always relieve feelings of rage and fury by committing any swift and violent action—yelling until my lungs hurt, punching a wall, or throwing hard objects. Now I am finding these methods of healing to be useless. I think I know why—I have changed, even in the past few minutes, because I now fit into a category I never thought possible. I am a runaway. I have always seen on television where a son and father have a dispute, the son leaves home, and both seem to reconcile and be in one another's arms within a half-hour episode. I never thought I would be in the same situation. On the other hand, I know my running away is not identical to fictional characters like *Opey Taylor*. The problems I have with my father will not be solved in thirty minutes or less.

I know I am growing up, but I don't want to let go. I refuse to surrender the easy and carefree lifestyle that is childhood. I have held a finger-aching grip as long as possible. My peers are eager to have a "normal life," and I cannot figure out why. I have the rest of my life to act responsibly. I am the only one to realize that once I get a job, that is it, my social life will be no longer. The closest thing I'll ever get to my childhood again is sitting in some rank nursing home at the age of 89 with nothing to do but smell my own shit-filled *Craftmatic Adjustable Bed*. My father is the one responsible for weakening my grip. Six months ago, he forced me to get a job by cutting off my monetary supply-line to his wallet. I hated him for it then, and even more so now. It is summer and I am supposed to be doing what I have done in the past—chasing sun-baked girls in bikinis around a swimming pool. I wanted to relish my last free summer before I start college in the fall; instead, I have spent the month of June and half of July doing nothing

but mindlessly scanning groceries in a 40-hour/week job. "I hate this job." I have been telling my father this since I started. My father responds, "You don't know what 'real work' is and you're keeping the job!" louder and angrier at each repetition of the conversation.

Our last conversation/confrontation took place moments ago and is the reason I left home. "You have whined and whined all summer about how bored you are. It is about time you had some responsibility in the 'real world,' and this job is going to be your first taste of it." I have always become furious with any mention of the term "real world"—it's as if the world I live in is insignificant and has no meaning or concept of reality. "If being a part of the 'real world' means conforming to a repeated, mind-sucking pilgrimage every day, I don't want any part of you or it!" I screamed at my father in retaliation to his wounding remark. My response was so frightening and vociferous that it would probably cause a small child to hide behind the pant leg of his/her mother. At this moment, I had tears in my eyes. My father finished the conversation by saying, "You can do what I want or leave." With this remark, I had a faint taste of salt in my mouth due to the direction my tears had taken. Before this day, my father had never made me feel devastated as he did at that moment. To the countryside around me, I profess "what an asshole!" once more, in current reflection of this remark. I took his words literally because he had never said them to me before. I do not want to leave my home, but I feel I have no other choice.

I know what I am doing is foolish. How could anyone expect to survive on twenty-four dollars and without a car? Whatever form my future may take pales in comparison to living/suffering the rules of my father. Realizing this, I also know I want revenge against my father for ruining my life. Questions like, "What can I do to make my father regret what he has done?" flow through my mind. "I can't exactly kill myself—that kind of defeats the purpose of revenge." With the exception of walking and scratching my naked legs from contact with overgrown weeds at the roadside, contemplation consumes all of my brainpower. My mind is centered on my father, so I do not notice the path I am taking. Similarly, any concept of time has escaped my awareness. In what seems like ten short minutes, I am surrounded by nothing but the warmth of the sun and the glow of wheat fields that, in sound, resemble a whisper with an occasional breeze. A degree cool enough to give me a slight shiver serves as a

smelling salt to bring me back to reality. I am plotting against my father so intensely that I have not noticed I am walking through a forest. The towering canopy high above my head is so completely interlocked with wood and leaves that it prevents light of the summer sun from penetrating. My father and my troubles with him seem like distant memories to me now. In fact, a sense of separation and loneliness has slowly crept its way into my mind, unnoticed. I feel like the one American flag planted on the surface of the moon, abandoned by the rest of humanity.

The mental distance between my father and me widens as a tsunami of terror and panic looms over me and crashes upon my defenseless body. Being engulfed in a sea of pale-yellow headlights in the middle of a forest is enough to make any of my worries trivial. I hold my hand in front of my face to shield my eyes from the light of a slowly-approaching vehicle. "If it's him, if it's my father, I'm not going back," I tell myself as feelings of anger and hatred begin to fester inside my mind. "He has probably come to reclaim his property like some pissed-off plantation owner!" I stand rooted to the paved surface below me as I observe a gray station wagon. "It's not my father!" I say aloud. Several rust spots on the car resemble bullet holes, and I notice the hubcaps are missing. "That's definitely not my father"! I can briefly make out a solitary black shape that controls the vehicle, and I feel it watch me as it passes. As the car starts to slow down, I am finding sick humor and irony in my present situation. Fifteen minutes ago, I compared life under my father with smelling my own shit, and I am now so frightened that I find I may endure the same fate.

The car is stopped and is reversing its path toward me. The faint flickering of red from the taillights gives the trees an appearance of being set afire. "I have seen too many horror movies that start like this," I am thinking as the car stops in front of me. I want to do nothing but run away, but I can't. Fear has paralyzed me because there feels like a layer of ice between the ground and my feet. The inside of the car is brought to life as the dome light floods the inside. A bone-white hand is placed on the open door, the other on the edge of the car, as it struggles to rise from its dilapidated mechanical monstrosity. A broken, crotchety voice whispers to me "Would you please get in?" I can hear every warning my parents have ever given me on the dangers of hitchhiking. With the thought of my father again on my mind, I open the passenger door and get in. My father is not going to influence any decision I make.

The inside of the car itself is disgustingly filthy. On the empty seats are several wadded tissues and hamburger wrappers, filling station cups with brown coffee stains around the edges, and a couple of empty cigarette packs. I notice the way he takes care of his car reflects the way he cares for his body. The man has dark red scabs surrounded by flakes of dead skin covering both arms. He has stringy white hair that ends before the top of his head and I can tell he rarely washes it. He has dirt-filled fingernails longer than what men normally wear, and I can see in front of me, about fifty used cigarette butts crammed into an ashtray probably built for twenty. There are faded religious pamphlets in the crevice of the dash and windshield, and in the back seat, there are crates of different books and colored binders. "He's probably a salesman," I think to myself, "but who would buy anything from this nasty man?" The man and I don't talk much. We have a brief conversation about my destination, which seems to have an underlying meaning. "Where was I going?" I didn't want to end up alone and grotesque like this old man. Our conversation does not last long because I ask the old man to let me out at the nearest town. In fear of life without anyone close to me, I change my mind and decide to go home.

Walking home, I somehow make my way to the place where I went to school as a child. I walk over the playground, over the swings and merry-go-round. I remember how much fun I had running down the hill during recess where I presently stand. My lifestyle was more carefree than the family dog—my biggest concern was whether I would make it home in time to watch daily reruns of *Three's Company*. I find myself smiling when I think about the memories I have of my friends. I take a long look around that playground and realize how alone I am, and how alone I don't want to be. There is no one here, only memories.

Difference a Day Makes

Scott Lloyd DeWitt

My parents still live in the town where I went to high school. Morris, Illinois is twenty miles outside of Joliet, a little over an hour outside of Chicago, and has seen tremendous growth in the past twenty years. "Tremendous" is, of course, relative. Historically a farming community and the county seat for over 100 years, the town was forced to change its "Welcome to Morris" signs from population 8000 to 10,000, a figure that hadn't risen or fallen significantly enough to warrant the cost of a new welcome sign for at least four census takings.

The 1980's did to Morris what they did to many small towns, especially to those that were actually big towns when compared to their surrounding communities. All the talk in the 1970's about Morris as a "future model community" materialized. Bigger, better, and more of it was the dose, but all with an underlying rural sensibility. At first, no one figured that "in with the new" really meant "out with the old." But soon Division Street became four lanes from one end of town to another, carefully by-passing the dying downtown. Mr. Quick's and Hornsby's quietly closed their doors with little more fanfare than "THANK YOU Morris for your years of patronage." Subdivisions, the epitome of '80s housing, ranging from snap-together doubles to neighborhoods named "estates," "ridge," or "woods," blurred the city limits between town and county. Except for the Chapter 11 business owners themselves and a few homeowners whose property values plummeted when the new four-lane was directed a bit too close to their front porches, few mourned the death of Anytown, too absorbed in the rapid, concurrent influx of synchronized traffic lights and left turn lanes, big chain fast food restaurants, and housing developments built on what was once rich, fertile farmland.

And, of course, Wal-mart. There is always a Wal-mart.

"We have gangs in our high school, now." I kept the newspaper in front of me, trying to block my chuckle. It didn't work. Morris's changing face is one topic my father likes talking to me about. He's active in the community, mostly as a Rotarian, especially since his retirement. "Really," he tried to convince me. "They're coming in from Joliet, some of them from Chicago, and recruiting, trying to get gangs started here in the high school. Do you know what it means when they

wear their hats backwards?" He spoke as if he were reading some type of brochure, a four-page fold-out entitled, "How to Identify a Gang Member," or "When Gangs Come to Your Town." What I could piece together from his story was that two Joliet police officers were the featured program at a recent Rotary Club meeting. They talked about gang activity in Joliet and Chicago and expressed their concern about the possibilities and probabilities of gangs moving to small surrounding towns where naive, unsuspecting adolescents from the sticks yearn for the excitement and danger of city life.

And sure enough, they had brochures.

Whenever my father overloads me with such complex notions with such little preparation, I usually react with sarcasm. It's a defense mechanism that cuts me a few minutes to carefully read and respond to his reality. "Dad, gangs are nothing new at Morris Community. Had 'em when I was there. They all shaved their heads together in brotherhood. They had their colors and their territories. You didn't want to get caught on their turf. Language of their own. Leaders and followers." He could tell by my tone that I was setting him up, and he didn't respond. Instead, he waited as he has learned to do. "Morris's own Fighting Redskins. The football team, Dad. For that matter, I'd say the Future Farmers of America could be a gang. They always wore those funny blue corduroy jackets, that yellow lettering. And now that I think about it, one or two of them wore their hats backwards." He was not amused.

My father's reality always challenges me. Deconstructing his reality was rarely difficult. Convincing him of its uninformed nature, however, was not so easy. Actually, it's not only my father's reality. It's much bigger than that. Even bigger than Morris, really. This reality, which isn't very real at all, grows from a pervasive fear and misunderstanding of difference. Clearly, it would be foolish of me to assert that Morris doesn't need to be concerned about gang activity. Only twenty miles away in Joliet, gang activity had devastated the city's youth, and what resources were once available had been all but dissipated. Gang activity moving into surrounding rural communities was indeed probable, however absurd the picture looked.

Yet, Morris's reality of gangs in their town was not entirely evidenced in actual gang activity. Instead, it relied on a tidy reality where the world can be sorted out in the text of a brochure, where a

blaming, shame culture prevails and where quick-fixes injure and victimize. Morris as “model community” offered much to new residents: small-town living, affordable housing and property taxes, reasonable commuting distance to urban workforce centers, low crime rate, productive and financially secure schools. It’s not hard to imagine why families would leave their cities and move to Morris. Yet, as the face of Morris changed, so did the faces of its citizens. And many of these faces were not white.

Today I trace my homosexuality (and I intend to use this term in its clinical sense) to somewhere around the age of five. Very different, though, is my first memory of “gay.” My family was watching an episode of *Maude* (on network television, prime time, the first time the program aired, not repeats on “Nick at Night”) where Maude and her husband, Walter, discover that an acquaintance is gay. Whereas there were indeed jokes made about the character and his gayness, for the most part I don’t remember anything in the characterization, the image being represented, that was inherently bad. Of course, because gayness was the very subject of the show—the plot hinged on this detail—I knew that there had to be something controversial about it. In other words, I didn’t understand the term, “gay,” but I understood quite well that whatever “gay” was, it signified difference.

Then my mother explained the term to my father, who, like his nine-year-old son, did not know its meaning. “Oh,” he began in an effeminate tone of voice, “A fruit! A fairy!” He flipped his limp wrist. We all laughed. I still didn’t really possess a definition of “gay,” but I certainly knew what “gay” meant.

Negative images of gay people continued to surround me, mostly on television and in movies. But if all the world’s a stage, Morris was providing plenty of script with scene, characters, and plot. Local rumors tell the story of a popular, well-known woman in the community, a teacher, who came home to find her husband in bed with another man. Her story, which quickly turned into his story, spread from school to church to local lore with little effort and usually ended with “that’s how those people are, you know.” Police found a high school student in the back seat of his car with an out-of-town boy parked at the river landing. There were no charges filed, and the boys were told to go home.

They were doing nothing to break the law. (In fact, this local boy, today an out, confident, adult gay man who has absolutely nothing to hide, stands firm that they truly were doing nothing at all, both too caught up in their 17-year-old naivete and fear to move toward anything remotely sexual.) But just as small-town police have the best drugs, they have the best stories, too, and they love to tell them. Freely. And fictitiously. Luckily the boy was nearing the end of his senior year at Morris Community High School; he need only to endure the exaggerated, lurid tales of his sick escapades a few months longer when he could then leave town for college.

In a world where young people do not see real gay and lesbian people living their real lives, these images gain power in that they are the only representations available to them. An individual image in and of itself is rarely harmful; in fact, the image is usually quite simple, created and maintained by simple thinking. But when it is the only image available, it is granted power that is certain to be identity forming. In Morris, Illinois, there was nothing available to counter the images I was confronted with. These images were my reality. And a lifetime of internalized *weak/dishonest/twisted/hyper-sexual* was not going away over night.

I've come into my "athletic self," if you will, rather late in life. At the age of 35, I've been playing competitive volleyball for a few years, playing twice a week in local leagues, traveling to cities around the country to play in weekend tournaments. In light of my attitude and experience with organized sports as a young person—no way, no how—it's strange to me that I not only spend so much time learning plays and positions, but that I actually enjoy it.

When I'm positioned as a back row, defensive player, I'm always moved to the left side of the court where I play "up." My jobs include covering dinks (light taps into our court), picking up balls deflected off my teammates' block, and digging my opponents' hits that cut across the court at a sharp angle, often with tremendous speed and power. With this latter responsibility, I find that my reflexes are often challenged. A strong player in this position will always have knees bent, arms extended outward and slightly forward, angled carefully so that contact with the ball will simply pop it up into the air so we can design

an offensive play against our opposing team. Sometimes, when the ball comes hard and fast toward me and my arms just don't move where I need them to, I merely try to get any body part I can on the ball, again hoping to get the ball up in the air.

A few weeks ago, my city league team, average age 32, was scheduled to play "The Children," a team of local high school boys, average age 16, who, like all high school athletes, are developing their skill in sports while their bodies still suffer from fits and spurts of growth. The Children are great fun to watch. They play a scrappy game, throwing themselves on the floor with great abandon and twisted pleasure, their speed on the court and ability to spring straight up from the floor at times rendered completely uncontrollable by their adolescent energy. But when they pull their game together—strategy, timing, power—they dance.

Watching The Children warm up for a match brings my team to a serious place, one consumed by deep, intellectual reflection. "God, they're half our age." "I never looked like that when I was sixteen." "This could get ugly." "Can I tell you how happy I am that I'll never have to be in high school again."

We are called to the court. The Children extend their hands in sportsmanship under the net to our front row players. We serve first. One child passes the ball effortlessly from his forearms, the next pushes the ball gracefully from his fingertips up into the air slightly behind his head. Our routine is equally as calculated. Two players at the net lock at the shoulders, bent at the knees, synchronizing their block. The rest of us in position, down, arms extended, anxiously guarding our assigned piece of thirty by forty-five foot varnished wooden territory. We watch as the third child is launched from the floor toward the net, rocket boy, his arm making full circle, his hand squarely contacting the ball that effortlessly clears the human wall built in front of him.

FUCKING FAGGOT! I begin to fall forward, despite the force with which Darrell Lear's closed fist drives into my face. I don't feel pain. Instead, I actually hear his hand strike the bridge of my nose, the sound of an oak branch cracking from the burden of a winter ice storm. My sight flashes white as my eyes are shaken in my skull, disconnecting. I reach out, the driver's mirror of my parents' car helps me stabilize. The darkness of the high school parking lot slowly returns

and brings me vision, and I see my three classmates inside the car, horrified, helpless, safe.

WHY DON'T YOU HIT ME BACK, DEWITT! FUCKING FAGGOT, WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU? His friends look on, laughing. He points through the windshield into the front seat of the car. *DEBBIE—YOU KNOW YOU'RE GOING OUT WITH A FUCKING FAGGOT?*

Another tree limb cracks, followed by white flash. The sound and light are simply remarkable, and they once again prevent pain.

I'm scared as their voices fade. What is happening? Where am I going? My sight returns, more quickly this time because I'm building resistance to the blows. I can see they are gone. I climb into the front seat behind the steering wheel, shut the door, and stare ahead. I lightly touch my face, and for the first time, I feel pain.

"God, Scott, are you ok?" Tom is the first of my teammates across the court. He towers above me, and he looks down on my face. Lawrence nervously laughs, his deep, gruff voice, "Shit, he really clocked that ball." The ref blows his whistle and asks if I'm OK. I nod. Tom winks, leans toward me, and mumbles our team's in-joke, "Cry later."

When I came out to my parents, I was certain they were going to say, "Yes, dear, we know. We were waiting for you to tell us." They aren't stupid, I thought. How could they not know? But like others of their generation, they had perfected their "selective awareness," the ability to pick and choose what they wanted to see and believe.

My coming out story isn't really out of the ordinary, aside from the note that my father scribbled out and tried to pass to my mother: "He's getting married." I guess my stammering, pacing, and evasive manner was similar to something he'd seen my older brother do twelve years earlier when he announced his high school girl friend was pregnant. My news was slightly different. My father reminded me that I have always been able to count on their support, and this didn't change anything. My mother fought tears. They pooled in her eyes, but not one spilled down her cheek. She was scared. Genuinely scared. The bits and pieces she could make of my future gave her little comfort.

"AIDS." Yes, Mom, I know. But I have the facts, and I'm very, very careful.

"You could get hurt, beat up. Killed, even." Yes, Mom, I know. But I'm not afraid, and I'm very, very careful.

"What about getting a job. All this time in school, and you might not get a job."

A job? Where did she get this? Was this in the script? What did she know about workplace discrimination? I was caught completely off guard. Unable to muster up the usual sarcasm I use with my father, I blurted out, "It'll be fine, Mom. No one will know."

I've been teaching for eight years now, and folks know. I tell them. I certainly haven't been closeted in my career, and I certainly haven't shied away from talking about being gay. At the same time, I wouldn't describe my style as "in your face" or aggressive, but I suppose those are relative concepts. If my mother were to ask me about being out in my career, ten years after coming out to her, I'd still say, "I'm very, very careful." I do not mean "cautious." I mean I have approached my career "with great care." Mindful. Observant. Attentive. Deliberate. Honest. Trying to ensure that every word, every action, every decision, is expressed with great care.

This hasn't been particularly easy. I face daily images and exchanges that make me question my role in this amazing activity called learning. One young man demanded the attention of a group of his peers working together in class, his tirade ending with those "gays" who insist on placing rainbow pride stickers on their cars. "It seems a really *odd* thing to be proud of, if you ask ME!" His peers sat still, unsure of how to respond. The issue was much too large to explore in the remaining three minutes of class, and I struggled for a way to intervene constructively, giving voice to anyone in that group of students who could not speak. The next day by the vending machines, I heard, "Hello, Dr. DeWitt." The young man, perfectly polite, almost sedate, asked me how my day was going as he opened his brown leather wallet, adorned with a sticker of the Confederate battle flag.

Another student, only one week after Matthew Shepard was tied to a fence post, savagely beaten, and left in the cold to die because he was gay, argued that "the whole thing is getting blown out of proportion because of one extreme case." I knew my student had a young

son, and I was silenced, not only by sadness and mourning over the death of someone I never knew, but by my student's inability to see himself in this tragedy. Many of us who attended a candlelight vigil that week were wearing stickers on our jackets: I am Matthew Shepard. I wanted to make a sticker for my student's jacket: I am Matthew Shepard's father.

I worked at lengths with a young woman who was determined to write a paper on what she believed were the serious implications of same-sex marriage. Perhaps her text didn't reveal it, but clearly she was passionate about her subject, writing from deep, heart-felt religious beliefs. When all was said and done, her argument was grounded in claims of faith—*that's just the way it is*. She made several unsuccessful attempts at revising her paper, and each time I coached her as to how she could strengthen her argument, one that positioned itself against me and my partner. When I find myself in these situations, my Gemini always appears. This time he whispered, "Tell her everything is just fine. Give her an 'A' and move on. She can't hurt you with this." My Gemini is not a teacher, and I always ignore his advice, however seductive it might be. So I explained to her where I believed her troubles were coming from. I began by emphasizing that I never wanted her to feel like she needed to leave her religious beliefs at the door, like a coat and hat that could be retrieved with a claim ticket on her way out. I also praised her for her determination and pressed upon her that she should continue working with her chosen topic if she so desired, but that she should also feel that she could change her topic if she were unable to break through the block she was facing. We talked about faith, and that what made faith so powerful is that it could "just be" if necessary. But I also compared the differences between how her church defined "truth" and how the academy defined "truth" and explained that various types of evidence were deemed acceptable and persuasive in some communities but not in others. And then I opened myself to her, explaining that I, too, had beliefs that I just couldn't defend using research and logic, that I just could not write about them in the terms that the university would demand. At the end of the quarter, one student's evaluation of my teaching spoke a certain truth of its own: "Dr. DeWitt shouldn't try to change his students."

"Of course I should try to change my students," I screamed at the evaluation form. "It's part of my job. Learning is change." I wouldn't be in this profession if I didn't believe that we had great capacity and desire for learning. I wouldn't be doing what I do if I didn't believe that change were both possible and certain. Many of my colleagues, upon hearing such sentiment, smile and say, "You're so young." Perhaps this is my faith. My faith. It can just be. If I didn't have faith, I tell myself, I may as well be pushing Post-it notes in a downtown office being far, far less careful.

I will lean against the kitchen counter, drinking my third cup of very strong coffee, watching him make his lunch. I won't say anything as he loads his sandwich with too much stuff to fit in a sandwich bag, let alone his mouth. I will realize that these mornings seem to be the only moments we have together, both of our lives having become increasingly complex. I will let him use the car—my old Honda, patched and pieced together, making its final miles—if he'll drop me off at the parking lot where I meet a colleague who allows me to carpool with her. "And please make sure I have enough gas in the morning—I won't have time to stop before I head out of town." He'll roll his eyes and say, "I always do." I will finish commenting on my students' drafts on my commute north to the rural campus where I teach. Each morning, on my ride from the city to fields, I will question my decisions to continue raising him in an urban setting, to send him to an urban school, to stay in the same small house that affords neither of us any privacy, the only place I will be able to afford in the city on my salary in these economically difficult times.

At the age of sixteen, he'll be so different from me. Straight, thick blond hair and gray-blue eyes. He will be strong, trim, his muscles cut not from artificial training at the gym, but from his constant physical activity. On the court, on the field, on the stage, always moving, always fueling. A machine. The difference in our appearance and in our corporeal abilities will not surprise me, his genetic make-up getting no code from my own. When he isn't in full motion, he will sit quietly at his piano, a used baby grand that will fill the entire dining room. He will refuse to "study" music, instead relying on his ear and instinct. He will play beautifully. His youthful political beliefs will swing left, then right,

and then around in circles within the course of one conversation. He will refuse the labels I, unmindfully, will try to place us in. My views, my perspective, he rejects any suggestion that he may have been influenced by my thinking.

“So who’s going to be here tomorrow night?” I will be gone over night, and I will trust him in the house alone. He will not look up: “If I told you, you’d just get all upset.” I will suggest that he take his chances and tell me anyway. “I don’t want you to run into any trouble. I need you to be safe.” Pictures of the two of us and his father will be framed on walls and on bookcases. Coffee table books, my CD collection, his father’s numerous awards and recognitions. It would not take much, even with the untrained eye, to identify this family portrait.

“That’s what you still don’t get. There is no such thing as an ‘untrained eye.’ Your race thing, your gender thing, your sexual orientation thing, we figured it out. It just doesn’t matter to us.” I will have watched him and his friends together, and indeed they will seem to have transcended the very questions I still hang onto, questions that have become a part of my identity. Is this just their way to dismiss, or have they really gotten a handle on this? I will not have figured that out yet. “It DOES matter, dammit. How can you stand there, the two of us in this house, and say it doesn’t matter?” I will find myself in the middle of one of my impassioned diatribes about difference and acceptance when I see him raise his eyebrows and mouth something about the 90s, his typical way of keeping me firmly situated in the moment when I came into my own. I will stop mid sentence, and I will try not to smile at his flip sarcasm. He will take one more shot for the win: “That was nice. Did you pull that one from your Clinton/Gore file?” I will then smile and fight the urge to respond with, “Whatever.”

“Things are different now.” He will call everything I know into question—my age, my hipness, my story—with one simple, generation-old statement. I will respond with forced enthusiasm, “Oh, I know.”

The Self Denied

Derek Waugh

"If you don't like religion, you can be the anti-christ. If you're tired of politics, you can be an anarchist!" -The Crass

I have sifted through a large quantity of dead wood in my life (much of it being my fellow human beings) and single handedly alienated many people that might have become my friends. Was it worth losing potential allies simply to keep my integrity? I think so. The most important thing in life is to be an individual. A large number of sheep amongst the herd compromise their intelligence and dignity, only to be a statistic. Just another number to be filed away in a soft womb of numerical obsession.

This number affliction attacks from all sides, until there are few options. Where can a lost apparition hide? Unto which wall can they avert their shifting, nervous eyes? The answer blows not in the wind my friend, but inside the catacombs of the self.

When I was a lad of sixteen, I felt the fear. Every moment that crawled by within the cold halls of my high-school was a new experience of alienation and rejection. Every passing second was dictated by this fear, until it towered over me like a diseased ape-god foaming at its twisted maw. Its muscle tissue rippled as its behemoth column of arm ended in a gnarled fist, its index finger directing me, with no words. And I obeyed this monstrosity of fear. It was my master and I would do anything to avoid its wrath. Its body was composed of authority figures, my fellow students, my parents, my teachers. And even further, this deity of cruelty was made of my fellow students' parents and those before them, to the start of time itself. It was made of everyone and everything that goes into establishing the "norm."

And so I struggled with this terror. It was the bully who spat in my food. It was the beautiful girl whose lips parted only to stifle a laugh and say "no." It was the snickering group of jocks that sneered at me and called me "freak" under their breath. All the idiots that cowered behind the skirt of "proper society." The frail little creatures who squirmed their way into the status quo without me, to embrace the strength found in numbers.

This continuous cycle of fear continued until one day when I came to the decision that I wanted no part of it. I realized that they were all just as afraid as I was. But their fear was different in one respect: they had not experienced my rejection, so they were still afraid of the being of truth inside them. They distorted their own visages in the mirror, essentially lied to themselves, to have that comfort of "fitting in."

The whole vicious cycle of self-deception dawned on me one day, breaking like a wave inside of my mind. If I was not born to fit in, so be it. I wasn't constructed of this gift of flesh, bone, and mind only to lie to myself. I did not desire to be in those columns of numbers. I did not slobber at the mouth for money and material gain. I didn't want the pristine automobile or the beautiful girl with a blonde mane and vast void whistling inside of her head. The land of the material was for those who were still afraid, those stumbling blindly in the land of the living with their eyes shut tight. I'd like to say that there was something solid that triggered this complete metamorphosis, something definite. But there wasn't. I simply decided I had to stop hiding from the truth.

Meanwhile, those poor zombified caricatures of life continued down their own paths. They still hated me for being different, but their ridicule seemed so pathetic to me now. The Abercrombie junkies no longer seemed so desirable. I grinned knowing those firm unobtainable female forms would rot in the ground just like mine. In death, beauty no longer matters. And it really doesn't matter in life. These were not goddesses to be placed on splendid marble pedestals. They were simply insecure little girls, lost in their sad twilight realm, having never felt the light of truth grace their faces.

Those football throwing demi-gods were reduced to hairless baboons in my eyes. Them and their chiseled, concrete faces buried in a sea of pop-parties and barley and hoppers. Their bodies would fail just like mine. After the machinery of the flesh and bone fails, where would they find themselves? Staring directly into the eyes of ineptitude and finality. The end of the line.

I'd like to say that I'm big enough to forget that rejection, that solemn feeling of being left out. I'd like to say that the discovery of truth is enough to sustain me, but I can't. At the same time, I can't simply blame those who ridiculed me. I have to blame society itself. Everyone is hell-bent on the material and self-gain. Devour the meek and different and lick the flesh from the bone. This is the way of the

world. I can't forgive this world or the people within it. We are all at fault.

But it seems too simplistic to say we have to change. No one is willing to change. Most people are quite comfortable in positions of popularity. Most people would rather not see the truth. And I guess I can understand that. But some of us are willing to see the new light and preach its gospel. Some of us are unable to forget what was done to us in high school. But we're not going to get our revenge by mass-murder. No. We're simply going to laugh at you on the inside. So go ahead, put on your Walt Disney World-vision sunglasses. Sniff a rose and ignore the problem. But popularity is a temporary thing. Truth is permanence.

Contributors' Notes

Scott Lloyd DeWitt is associate professor of English at OSU Marion. His essay, "Difference a Day Makes," is a collection of short narrative pieces that he plans to incorporate into a multimedia documentary entitled, "The Difference School Makes." His students enrolled in English 268/568, The Writing of Creative Nonfiction produced this issue of *V&V*.

Kelle Gabriel is an English major hoping to graduate June 2000. After graduation, she plans to spend as much time as possible with her son, Matthew.

Jill Leathem is majoring in English and will graduate Spring 2000.

Douglas Lewis is a senior at OSU Marion and hopes to attend graduate school in English in the near future. He enjoys thinking, writing, painting, and arguing. He hopes, eventually, to understand at least one thing completely.

Jason Lichtenberger has been a student at OSUM since Autumn Quarter 1996. He is an English major and will graduate Spring Quarter 2001. After that, he hopes to find a graduate program that will have him and one day teach English. Of course, these aspirations would be tossed aside if he won a million dollars from Regis.

Jennifer Neville is a first year student at OSU Marion and is majoring in Journalism. This is her first contribution to *Veritas & Vanitas*.

You may have seen **Jonas Shamel** in the movie *Deliverance* (idiot boy on porch with banjo). Or perhaps you've seen his critically acclaimed documentary, *All About the Love*. Jonas was a graduate of River Valley in 1997 and is a junior majoring in English. This is his first

submission to *Veritas & Vanitas* under his real name. He enjoys playing the Jew's harp in the church choir, collecting Backstreet Boys memorabilia, and rasslin'. This summer will see the release of his collaboration with Russ Meyer entitled, *Big Explosions in the Valley of the Whores*.

Derek Waugh is a student of life. He is also a student at OSU Marion. He digs writing, drawing, philosophy, and punk rock. Opposed to working for his money, he wishes that he could do a "funny little dance" and the money would fall from the sky. He also wishes that some divinity would firebomb the religious right from the face of the earth.

Brooke Wilson, now a junior, has been at OSU Marion since 1997. She is an English major who, after graduating in 2001, hopes to go to graduate school.



Photos by Kelle Gabriel and Brooke Wilson